

Cracking the Curiosity Code

*The Key to Unlocking Human
Potential*

Diane Hamilton, PhD

Chapter 4

Curiosity and Leadership

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more
and become more, you are a leader.

Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last*

The number one question related to curiosity is, “Is there a correlation between curiosity and motivation?” The second most-asked question is, “What is the correlation between curiosity and leadership?”

Are successful leaders typically more curious than the rest of us?
Is curiosity one of the secrets to better leadership?

According to most behavioral scientists and business leaders, the answer is an unqualified yes. While curiosity, many will say, does not ensure that a business leader will be successful, you won't find many successful business leaders who are not highly curious. In fact, many of them, including Microsoft founder Bill Gates, describe curiosity as one of the three Cs of successful leadership along with creativity and commitment.

Considering this emerging tenet, it might be surprising to learn that some leaders are reluctant to apply this principle. The thought is that curiosity is a distinction that separates excellent leaders from those deemed less effective. Those deemed less effective, research suggests, tend to avoid failing, being criticized, making hard decisions, taking responsibility, or being unable to reach an important goal. As a result, they may fear that their curiosity could expose them as not being as smart as they want people to believe.

Also, as a result, those leaders often surround themselves with individuals who are experts to compensate for their own lack of curiosity. Know anyone like that? That practice tends to inhibit them from developing curiosity skills on their own. Effective leaders, by contrast, appear to be comfortable in the space of the unknown, the uncomfortable.

The same curiosity that can be stymied by fears becomes the antidote for overcoming them. Deborah Bowie, CEO of

Transforming Lives through Charitable Giving, stated, “The opposite of fear is not bravery, but curiosity. When we know more, we fear less.”

But how do less effective or aspiring leaders develop curiosity? And how is that curiosity best expressed?

In addition to being a bestselling author and keynote speaker, Kevin Cashman is the senior partner for CEO and Executive Development at Korn Ferry, the world’s leading executive search firm. He says the answers to those questions require simply “asking questions and listening.”

When I interviewed Kevin, he stated, “Questions are the expressive, probing language; and listening is the receptive, facilitating language. Combined, these two behaviors are the key to leadership development.” He continued, “Learning agility is more critical than IQ, and the foundation of learning agility is curiosity!”

Another dimension of curiosity, as Cashman cautiously pointed out, is that “Some people are more curious about themselves than curious about those they lead or how they can advance their team to the next level. That is not necessarily a good type of curiosity.”

In a survey of more than a thousand CEOs, the majority cited curiosity and open-mindedness as leadership traits that are becoming increasingly critical in these competitive times.

One of the respondents, McCormick & Company CEO Alan D. Wilson, said, “The business leaders who are always expanding their perspective and what they know—and have that natural curiosity—are the ones who are going to be successful.” Examine

the attributes of a successful leader, he says, and you'll find curiosity at or near the top.ⁱ

In his weekly senior leadership meeting, GE President and CEO Jeffrey Immelt asked his leaders to reflect on the one leader who was most influential in their lives. He also asked them to cite the characteristic or behavior that made the influence strong. The answers varied, but they had one common theme. They said,

“He listened...”

“He was interested in my opinion on matters...”

“She sought my advice...”

“She made it a point to solicit thoughts from others...”

“He made me feel like I knew as much as he did...”

“He always solicited new thoughts and ideas...”

“Interesting,” Immelt said in response to this feedback. “None of you cited attributes that suggested ‘direction giving.’ You all cited qualities of curiosity in others’ opinions. That is our mission—not to direct but to seek new ideas.”ⁱⁱ

When asked to name the one attribute CEOs will need most to succeed in these turbulent times, Michael Dell, the chief executive of Dell, Inc., replied, “I would place my bet on curiosity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What’s emerging is an era in which leaders are not expected to have all the answers; rather, they demonstrate a strong curiosity and propensity for asking questions. “Curiosity,” Dell noted, “inspires leaders to continually seek out fresh ideas and approaches needed to keep pace with change and stay ahead of competitors.”^{iv}

The famed Hollywood producer Brian Grazer wrote in his book, *A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life*, “If you’re the boss, and

you manage by asking questions, you're laying the foundation for the culture of your company or your group.”^v

Grazer further stated that leading by curiosity can help to generate more ideas from all areas of an organization while helping to raise employee engagement levels.

Warren Berger, author of *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*, talked about the notion that curiosity can be good for business, an idea that's not entirely new. He said that Walt Disney declared that his company managed to keep innovating “because we're curious, and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.”^{vi}

While conducting research for his book, Berger uncovered numerous examples of leaders and CEOs (including Netflix's Reed Hastings, Square's Jack Dorsey, and the team behind Airbnb) who relied on a strong curiosity as the foundation for reinventing entire industries.

Berger told how Dorsey was curious to know why an artist friend lost a big sale to a potential customer simply because the artist couldn't accept a credit card. Dorsey disliked the fact that only established businesses, not smaller entrepreneurs, were able to conduct credit card transactions. That curiosity resulted in the creation of Square, a highly accessible credit card reader. He stated that “endless desire to explore new paths” becomes even more important in today's fast-changing, innovation-driven marketplace.

Dave Ulrich is known as the Father of Modern HR and HR Thought Leader of the Decade. He has written thirty books and more than 200 articles about leadership. In my interview with Dave, he talked about the power of soft skills and experimentation. He's also a strong advocate of “failing forward”

and the importance of having curiosity not about the event itself but about the process leading up to the event. “What did we learn along the way about how we got here?” becomes the question.

Curiosity, it appears, is not only for start-up companies. Leaders of established companies, such as Panera Bread’s CEO Ron Shaich, said curiosity is vital to surviving in a perpetually changing competitive landscape. “Every day, a new competitor arrives on the horizon, and every day it takes new ideas to retain whatever competitive edge you may have; even if they come from other industries, or even outside the business world.”

So, if curiosity is such a vital element of effective leadership, why is it not more prevalent among leaders? The characteristic of curiosity is alien to traditional leadership norms. Many managers and top executives have risen through the ranks by providing fixes and solutions, not by asking questions. And once they’ve attained a position of leadership, they may feel the need to project confident expertise. To acknowledge uncertainty by wondering aloud and asking deep questions carries a risk; the leader may be perceived as lacking knowledge.

In *The Innovator’s DNA*, authors Clayton Christensen, Hal Gregersen, and Jeff Dyer^{vii} studied curious, questioning leaders who seemed to overcome this risk because they had a rare blend of humility and confidence. They were humble enough to acknowledge that they didn’t have all the answers and confident enough to be able to admit that in front of everyone else.

While we may tend to think of curiosity as a hardwired personality trait, meaning that we are born with it, Ian Leslie, author of *Curious*,^{viii} said curiosity is actually “more of a state than a trait,” and that we all have the potential to be curious but only under the right conditions.

Leslie noted that curiosity bubbles up when we're exposed to new information and then find ourselves wanting to know more. Hence, the would-be curious leader should endeavor to get out of the bubble when possible and to seek new ideas, influences, and experiences to fire up the desire for learning more and digging deeper.

Even when operating within familiar confines, curious leaders tend to see things from a fresh perspective. Those I researched seemed to have a penchant for bringing a beginner's mind approach to old problems and stubborn challenges. They continually examine and re-examine their own assumptions and practices. They also ask penetrating "Why" questions and speculative "What if" and "How" questions.

Curious leaders tend to urge people in their organizations to question everything. This can serve to model the behavior for others, though leaders may have to go much further by providing sufficient freedom and incentives to actually create the conditions for curiosity to flourish company-wide.

In the end, it isn't necessarily easy for a leader to foster curiosity on an individual or organizational level, but it may be well worth the effort. "With curiosity comes learning and new ideas," said Dell. "If you're not doing that, you're going to have a real problem."

Author and business consultant Michael Hvisdos, founder and CEO of Inquizos, a firm focused on customer loyalty, saw the paradox as a more systemic dilemma. He said, "I have worked with more than forty different organizations during the past few years that have embarked on a journey to transform the way they engage their customers. All made significant investments in retraining their customer-facing teams to engage differently, deliver value, and focus on *the one thing* their customers care

most about: business outcomes. But not all have seen their investment bear fruit.

“Why should their levels of success be so variable?” Hvidos continued.

“Countless business books have been written about this very subject. Whether it’s organizational change or business strategy, almost everyone identifies the same reasons: business leaders typically do a poor job of leading change, be it due to competing priorities, lack of knowledge or poor application.”

But if we know these reasons, why do leaders and their teams still struggle?

After analyzing a detailed study by Donald Sull, Rebecca Homkes, and Charles Sull published in the *Harvard Business Review*, “Why Strategy Execution Unravels—And What to Do About It,” Hvidos reduces the issue to one simple conclusion: many leaders lack curiosity.

He explained, “Simply defined, curiosity is, ‘the desire to learn or know more about something or someone.’ It is the starting point to every great idea, invention and new business. It is what makes some businesses wildly successful while others are just average, and it’s the real reason why some leaders and their teams succeed, while others fail.”

As Jeff Bezos put it, “You have to say, ‘Wait a second. Why are we doing it this way? Could it be better? Could it be different?’ That kind of curiosity, that explorer’s mind, that childlike wonder, that’s what makes an inventor.”^{ix}

Leaders fail time and again to understand the situations, people, or customers they are engaging with because they simply aren’t

curious about them and feel more comfortable not leaving their comfort zones to find out.

Sull, Homkes, and Sull argued that organizations fail at execution because they don't adapt quickly enough to changing market conditions. Most leaders solve problems by trying to reduce them to single dimensions. And while that's true, what they really lack is more fundamental. They lack what the authors describe as "business curiosity."^x

Business Curiosity

Thriving in a complex, volatile business environment requires leaders who approach every problem and every opportunity with an inquisitive spirit. This curiosity drives leaders to learn their companies inside and out. They never stop looking for ideas to improve.

This thirst for knowledge and wondering why enhances their ability to spot trends, anticipate changes, and tackle challenges. As Nolan Bushnell, co-founder of Atari and author of *Finding the Next Steve Jobs*, said, "Being able to problem-solve is more advantageous than just knowing the right answer."^{xi}

The phrase "business curiosity" continued to emerge in my conversations and research. Leaders and analysts alike consistently described the quality as continually asking why. Answers don't change the world, they say; questions do.

According to many who study successful leadership, business curiosity challenges leaders to question the very processes that made them successful and are used by their organizations and the customers they serve. Only when they question the very beliefs

that made them successful can leaders start to reshape thinking, actions, and outcomes. It is then that they can start to capture and create more value for the businesses they lead.

In 2014, *Forbes* magazine contributor Micha Kaufman listed 10 Traits of Great Business Leaders. Six of these have direct ties to curiosity:

- Passion
- Vision
- Persistence
- Having an eye for talent
- Fearlessness
- Unwillingness to take no for an answer

The relentless pursuit to understand why allows you to think differently, learn from mistakes, and understand what makes people and organizations tick.

So again, why don't more leaders exhibit this critical trait?

As Hvidos said, "Almost every business leader will say that one of the biggest challenges they face is managing time. Leaders get pulled in countless directions at a pace that would make a Formula One race feel like a Sunday afternoon stroll.

"But in reality, most leaders spend far too much time on low value, under-productive chores, which at best create only incremental value to the business and the teams they lead."^{xii}

Hvidos went on to describe how many leaders devote their time to the many inward issues that sustain what he calls status quo thinking. This erodes their ability to exercise the curiosity that inspires new ideas that push their teams to new heights.

Mitch Little is vice president of worldwide sales for the semiconductor giant Microchip. He summed it up this way, “I think the biggest hurdle to developing curiosity is simply history and past beliefs. We have been groomed as leaders and sales people for generations to focus on our products, their benefits, their features, and the competition.

“Our legacy is the biggest impediment to our future. It is time to think differently! Once that legacy is understood and unleashed, the natural curiosity of our childhood can come out again. Leaders who purposely spend 60–80% of their time traveling and engaging with their team for months will be amazed what they will learn both about their team and about themselves.”^{xiii}

Business curiosity (curiosity quotient or CQ) is not as widely studied as IQ and EQ, but as the *Harvard Business Review* article, “Curiosity Is as Important as Intelligence,” discussed, people with a higher level of curiosity are more inquisitive and open to new experiences than others. They find novelty exciting and are quickly bored with routine. They tend to generate many original ideas and are counter-conformist.

The article noted that CQ is just as important when it comes to managing complexity. First, individuals with a higher CQ are generally more tolerant of ambiguity than those with a lower CQ. This nuanced, sophisticated, subtle thinking style defines the very essence of complexity.

Second, CQ leads to higher levels of intellectual investment and knowledge acquisition over time. Knowledge and expertise, much like experience, translate complex situations into familiar ones. Thus, CQ is the ultimate tool for leaders and their teams to devise simple solutions for complex problems.

Analysts, consultants, and business leaders alike remind me that although we are born with curiosity, we are not born leaders. Leadership skills must be developed.

They also remind me that the path to developing effective leadership skills is not IQ or even EQ, but CQ, the ability to retain the curiosity we exhibited as children. Successful leadership is derived by asking simple questions such as:

- “What if . . . ?”
- “Why do we do it this way?”
- “Is there a more efficient way?”
- “What do you think?”

Business today has evolved from the traditional militaristic, top-down leadership model referred to as Command and Control to a simpler, more engaging approach of Ask, Trust, and Track.

And curiosity has emerged as a vital leadership quality.

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- ⁱ <https://hbr.org/2018/09/curiosity>
- ⁱⁱ <https://hbr.org/2015/09/why-curious-people-are-destined-for-the-c-suite>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v <https://www.amazon.com/Curious-Mind-Secret-Bigger-Life/dp/1476730776>
- ^{vi} <https://www.amazon.com/More-Beautiful-Question-Inquiry-Breakthrough/dp/1632861054>
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- ^{viii} <https://www.amazon.com/Curious-Desire-Know-Future-Depends/dp/B00MR9RD16>
- ^{ix} <https://hbr.org/2015/03/why-strategy-execution-unravelsand-what-to-do-about-it>
- ^x Ibid.
- ^{xi} <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/226510>
- ^{xii} <https://www.management-issues.com/opinion/7048/leader-/>
- ^{xiii} <https://www.management-issues.com/opinion/7048/leadership-and-the-curiosity-quotient/>